# THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

# Love Story

## March 7, 1999

## John M. Buchanan

Until my late thirties, I saw the Christian life as being primarily about believing.... Now I no longer see the Christian life as being primarily about belief.... Rather, the Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the risen living Christ, or the Spirit. And a Christian is one who lives out his or her relationship to God within the Christian tradition. My own journey has led beyond belief and beyond doubt and disbelief to an understanding of the Christian life as a relationship to the Spirit of God - a relationship that involves one in a journey of transformation.

Marcus Borg
*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*

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CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Exodus 17:1-7
John 4:5-42

"...Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty..." (John 4:15) (NRSV)

*Dear God, we come to church because we are thirsty –thirsty for truth, thirsty for a sense that how we live and what we believe matters, thirsty for something real and compelling, something important enough to warrant our commitment. So come to us—speak your word to us—give us living water, in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Allan Jones, Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, a leading thinker in the area of spirituality, says that the greatest struggle we have is coming to terms with the idea that we are loved.

Jones tells about going to seminary without much by way of a personal faith, and learning about Christianity not as a series of intellectual arguments but in acts of kindness and love.

The dean of the seminary, a complex man, one day asked him to go for a walk and exhibited such receptivity and grace, that he was, Jones says, "the bearer of the miracle that I mattered."(*Daybook*, Winter 1999, p.39)

"The miracle that I mattered". . . . That, it seems to me, is something of what happened at noon one day, at a village well in Samaria, when a young Jewish rabbi from Galilee asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of water.

It is, I think, a true love story—the very best love story of all. It is also a well crafted short story in five scenes.

Jesus and friends are walking from Judea, in the south, back to their home in Galilee, in the north. They take a detour from the main road and go through Samaria. The text says they had to go through Samaria, but that is not true unless you have business to do in Samaria. It's out of the way. If you are driving from Evanston to Hyde Park, you don't go by way of Aurora unless you have business in Aurora. So maybe the most important fact of all is that Jesus thinks there is a compelling reason to go in the first place. Maybe, in fact, he wants to see someone. Maybe he wants to teach his friends something and this inconvenient detour is the way to do it.

Besides, Samaria was a despicable place according to Jewish custom, and Samaritans were regarded – all of them – inferior, racially and religiously and socially. It all goes back to an incident that happened 700 years earlier and it involved a family argument about whose temple was the real one and whose city was the really holy city, and whose religion was the true one. And when you get all these dynamics in the mix it isn't long

until one group thinks the other group is lazy, no good, irresponsible, doesn't smell good, you can't trust them, never turn your back. In fact, when Jesus wanted to make a point one time, he used an oxymoron to do it – "Good Samaritan." Everyone knew there is no such thing.

So there they are in Samaria and not too happy about it, and it's noon and hot and they're hungry, so his friends go to the nearest town to look for food and leave him sitting alone at the well. A woman approaches, a Samaritan woman.. She has come for water and has a bucket. Jesus asks her for a drink.

The conversation at first is full of irony and misconnections. One scholar says it sounds at first like a George Burns – Gracie Allen routine.

He says, "I'm thirsty. May I have a drink?" She answers, "But Jews don't drink with Samaritans." He says, "I can give you living water." She answers, "But you don't even have a bucket." He says, "If you drink living water you will never be thirsty." She responds, "I'll take some."

The conversation is easy, with a kind of winsome charm. She's good at it. They banter about religion, her marital status, which she lies about, but he already knows about. And at the end of the scene she has concluded that she is talking with a holy man, maybe even the Messiah.

The disciples return with lunch and see him talking with her and are astonished. Horrified is more like it. Jews don't talk to Samaritans, eat or drink with Samaritans, drink from the same cup with Samaritans. Rabbis don't engage women in conversation in public. There's even a regulation prohibiting a rabbi from acknowledging his own wife in public in daylight. And to make matters worse, infinitely worse, they can see that it is an engaging conversation. She loves it. He does too. It's a scene loaded with romantic potential. Isaac found his wife at a well. So did Moses. So did Jacob. Rachel came to a well and met Jacob and Jacob helped her water her sheep and then, the story goes, he kissed her and the rest, as they say, is history.

So the disciples are astonished. And although no one says it, Jesus surely understands their consternation, and they have to deal with an experience that challenges much that is important to them religiously, politically and socially.

The woman, meanwhile, so flustered that she leaves her water jar with Jesus, returns to town, tells everyone what has happened, and suggests that maybe he is the Messiah.

The people of the town follow the woman back to Jesus, who is now engaged in serious conversation with his disciples over lunch. And the Samaritan people do the most amazing thing. Jews distrust and hate Samaritans. Samaritans distrust and hate Jews. The Samaritan townspeople invite Jesus and friends to stay for a while and they do, for two days.

I think Jesus took his friends into Samaria looking for a way to teach, by demonstration, an important lesson. And I think his conversations with the woman at the well was an elegantly simple way of demolishing the layered centuries of bigotry and religious

exclusion which characterized both peoples, in a way that happened in Montgomery, Alabama forty years ago when Rosa Parks sat down in the front of the bus because her feet hurt.

Jesus did something that day no one had ever done before – he engaged in human discourse , friendship, hospitality, love, with a despised racial minority--a woman—and in that act challenged fundamental organizing principles of his culture, his nation, his own religion.

He did it, I believe, because religion so often serves the opposite purpose of dividing people, erecting barriers, excluding. Former Senator Paul Simon, in his remarks during the Michigan Avenue Forum last Wednesday night, was asked how his Missouri Synod Lutheran upbringing had shaped his public and political values. He laughed and explained that some of the leaders in his church thought that 95% of the people in heaven will be Lutherans. My Catholic friends in childhood thought heaven was reserved for Catholics. My Baptist chums were sure heaven was a Baptist enclave. And no one, not even us Presbyterians could conceive of a way a Buddhist or Muslim might squeeze in, or a Jew.

Jews presented a real problem. We didn't know any Buddhists or Muslims, but we had Jewish neighbors and we liked them a lot and they liked us. In fact, I was told that when I was three or four, my favorite thing in the world was to visit Mrs. Alexander, Mrs. A, we called her, a grandmotherly widow, who was Jewish, and help her do her ironing. If truth be told, she even let me use a little ironing board that belonged to her daughters. My father didn't think much of the ironing part, but we always had cookies and milk. When later I was assured by my friends that Mrs. A was going to hell, I had my first and lasting theological crisis. No one ever put it any clearer than my mother, who said, "Do you really believe God would send Mrs. A to hell?" I didn't and I don't.

But, with distressing frequency in human history, religion, Christianity with it,, has come to that very conclusion. And in that our tribe has God's undivided attention and a monopoly on heaven, the other tribes are obviously expendable ultimately, so why not right now as well? Auschwitz is the result.

Islam, in many ways, presents us with the most immediate form of the old dynamic. "Muslim fundamentalists. . .. Muslim terrorists" have become racial/religious stereotypes with which to marginalize a sizable percentage of the world's population and a growing percentage of our own.

In Croatia two years ago, we visited refugee camps: first Bosnian Catholic refugees. The camp was well maintained, neat, orderly. The people we visited warned us to be careful when we visited the Bosnian Muslim refugees. "You know those people," we were warned. "Be careful." "No", I said, "I don't know them at all." And I was told that Muslims were shiftless, irresponsible, dirty and violent. Those are the same words I heard Northern Irish Presbyterians use to describe Northern Irish Catholics a few years ago. And decades before that white Americans similarly described black Americans.

We found the Muslim camp not nearly as well maintained and provided for, which, after years of witnessing the official gross negligence of Cabrini Green's infrastructure, from elevators to pot holes, came as no surprise to us. And we found Muslim men, women and children to be human beings, understandably wary, but simply human beings in a distressful situation, with the same hopes and dreams and fears and loves as the rest of us.

And so I was delighted to visit the Agape project in Ocijek, funded by the Presbyterian Church (USA) which was helping rebuild Muslim villages destroyed in the war. I learned that Islamic impressions of Christianity are still shaped by the Crusades, by invading armies of Christians, destroying all vestiges of Islam. I learned how offensive the word "Crusade," as in "Christian crusade," "evangelistic crusade," is to people who were persecuted and massacred in a real crusade. I got to know Antol Bolag, a Serbian businessman, who now works for Agape and whose job is to gather the materials and labor to rebuild destroyed Muslim villages. The bombs that destroyed the Muslim villages belonged to the Serbian Orthodox Christians who carried out the ethnic cleansing. It was Antol who told me the story I have told before about working with a Muslim village chief whose plans for the rebuilding of his own village did not include the mosque. "Why?" Antol asked, "Don't you want to rebuild your place of worship?" "Because you're Christians," he answered. "You want to convert us. Why would we think you want to help us rebuild our mosque?" And Antol Bolag, God bless him, evangelical Christian, said, "We want to help you rebuild your mosque because we follow one who taught us to love our neighbors and who welcomed and loved all who came to him."

Just this past December Antol sent me a message through Steve Kurtz, our Presbyterian missionary in Ocijek. The Muslim Iman in Ocijek, Enis Polic, was having a difficult time and wasn't going to be able to continue his work among the Islamic community. Could we help? We did. On your behalf, I used a little discretionary mission money, and I wanted the congregation to know that, although I'm not sure it ever happened before, in a small, modest way, Presbyterians in Chicago are helping Ocijek Muslims.

This intentional gesture of Jesus is radically political and social as well as religious. When he transcended the theological and ethical boundaries of his own religion, and welcomed a woman who was not part of his neatly ordered world, he called his followers to the same radical inclusivity. It is a word of judgment on a culture which likes to call itself Christian and in which hate crimes continue with tragic regularity, perpetrated on the basis of race and sexual orientation.

This story is also intensely personal. The woman who met Jesus at the well is not only marginalized by her race and gender, she is a moral problem as well. She comes to the well at noon, by the way, when no one else is there. Women carry water in the cool of the early morning or early evening, never during the intense heat of high noon. She comes when she is sure she will not encounter anyone else because she's something of a bad joke in the village, certainly among the other women. She's been married five times. The law allows three husbands in certain circumstances. But she has had five, and furthermore, she's apparently given up on even the appearance of propriety because she's living with a man at the moment who is not her husband.

It's difficult to imagine a woman more marginal, more of a social outcast than that. That's why Jesus' friends are astonished. She's not only a Samaritan and a woman, she's been

fairly promiscuous. Again, Jesus is not put off or intimidated, but relates to her with his steady, amazing, unconditional acceptance. She is astonished. No one has ever given this gift to her before. When she tries to explain it to the townspeople, she says "He told me everything I have ever done." Given her personal history that must have been quite a list. She begins to change—to be converted—and it is because for the first time in her life, someone got past the facade, the outrageous behavior, to the person inside.

Professor Richard Lischer at Emory University says:

> "The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman turns out to be a love story after all, for only one who loves you knows you as you are and not as you pretend to be. Only one who loves you knows your deepest desires. Only one who loves you can look at your past without blinking."
> (*The Christian Century*, 2/24/99)

I thought about Anne Lamott, when the bottom had fallen out of her life, physically sick, drinking too much, using too many drugs, lying on her bed . . . "As I lay there," she writes, "I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner. . . .The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light to make sure no one was there, and of course there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew it was Jesus, just sitting there on his haunches, in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love"(*Traveling Mercies*, p. 49,50).

It's about a woman, a person thirsty, parched, thirsty for acceptance, forgiveness, thirsty for what Allen Jones called "the miracle that I matter."

And so the story invites you to acknowledge where in your life you are thirsty, where you feel shut out, put down, ignored, marginalized.

It may be that you don't measure up to someone else's expectation of you. It may be worse than that— you may not be living up to your own expectations of yourself. It may be that you have experienced rejection. Perhaps like this woman, you live somewhere outside the boundaries of convention or orthodoxy or traditional morality. Maybe you experience yourself living outside the boundaries of a community you want to claim as your own.

Perhaps you are thirsty for living water. I invite you to accept it, drink it. Know that you are loved. Know that the one who accepted and loved her can and does accept and love you.

The conversion, the transformation, in this story does not happen because Jesus criticizes, judges, recommends changes, places demands. It happens because he loves her. In his love she changes. She becomes his ambassador, his spokesperson, his witness, his friend, his minister. In that love, somehow, she becomes something she's never been before. She becomes lovely.

**It is a love story, finally.**

**My song is love unknown**
**My savior's love to me,**
**Love to the loveless shown**
**That they might lovely be.**
**Oh who am I**
**That for my sake**
**My Lord should take**
**Frail flesh and die?**

**Amen**